

# Online Graduate Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from the Social Work Faculty in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted all areas of life, and graduate education is no exception. Although prior research points to the effectiveness of delivering course content virtually, research on the effect of the unexpected and rapid nature of the transition from in-person to remote social work graduate education during the COVID-19 pandemic is limited.

**Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted through an online open-ended survey in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using purposive sampling, 20 Social Work faculty members were selected from 8 universities in Turkey. An online research-made e-questionnaire with five main essay open-ended questions was used for data gathering. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** In total, 20 social work faculty members aged 24 to 49 participated in this study. The faculty perspective on the students' online experience during the pandemic highlighted challenges faced by students, such as technical issues, communication difficulties, decreased engagement, and limited participation in school work. Faculty also observed students struggling with mental health, family issues, and pandemic-related financial difficulties. Moreover, faculty noted limitations in their teaching methods, particularly the lack of interaction during lectures. However, faculty identified effective strategies for online teaching, including using a mix of asynchronous video lectures and live discussions, promoting independent student work, reducing course content, and modifying assignments. They also emphasized the benefits of minimizing reliance on traditional lectures and PowerPoint presentations, encouraging students to engage with and analyze information.

**Conclusion:** Findings from this study point to the need for comprehensive institutional support to improve distance learning, including attending to students' social-emotional learning and a focus on developing faculty skills at teaching in a virtual capacity and may improve how effectively social work programs deliver course content online. Both students and faculty prefer a hybrid approach combining in-person and online methods.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Education, Remote Education, COVID-19, Turkey

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## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to remote learning happened quickly without adequate preparation or consistency in implementation across programs, courses, or faculty members. Faculty members with no experience of teaching remotely and no training in best-practices for online education were suddenly required to deliver their course content with no clear understanding of how to modify style or mode of delivery and with no advanced warning (1).

A significant body of research on remote education has consistently established that different forms of preparation and implementation are required for in-person compared to online education formats (2-6). Several key areas have been identified that require consideration, most notably planning, course design, teaching pedagogy, academic staff development, and quality assurance (5). Further research indicates that effective remote education requires institutional leadership, support, and resources tailored to the unique nature of online learning and teaching (7). The transition to remote learning has specific implications for social work education, setting it apart from other professions and educational programs, and warrants specific consideration (8).

In social work education, field practice is considered the signature pedagogy. To support this, the traditional teaching method is an in-person context as “hands-on” experience simulating clinical interactions and supporting the development of key relational skills (i.e., the role of non-verbal behavior, building clinical rapport, etc.) is essential. While empirical evidence suggests that formal, concrete content can effectively be taught and learned online, little data suggests that these key relational elements are equally amenable to an online format (9, 10).

Certainly, careful consideration and focused effort are essential for creating opportunities to practice in simulated clinical situations and developing fundamental relational skills for remote learning of social work practice (11). Similarly, specific training

on modeling relational skills and guiding simulating learning experiences is essential for social work faculty to teach this content effectively. As such, the sudden shift to remote education at the onset of the pandemic left little time for adapting course content and delivery methods, raising questions about the effectiveness of online learning in this situation.

In a prior study, we examined the experience of social work students in graduate education programs and their perspectives regarding 1) The challenges they faced resulted from the unexpected switch to remote learning and 2) the potential benefits gleaned from remote learning, including successful tools and methods used to provide instructional continuity and to create an effective learning environment (12). We found that students experienced significant disruption to their educational experience due to the pandemic and the sudden shift to online education. Students reported a general lack of familiarity, knowledge, and preparedness on behalf of faculty to effectively modify teaching in an online environment as a key barrier to their online learning. Students noted that even when they felt technologically competent and prepared for learning, the quality of teaching and instructors' technological skill and teaching style negatively impacted their learning. Furthermore, students reported that their ability to engage in and focus on coursework was negatively impacted by their stress, anxiety, fear, feelings of social isolation, and increased pressure to perform well in classes. Lastly, increased family problems and pandemic-related responsibilities further impacted finding a private space to conduct online sessions and study without distractions.

These findings of student experience are consistent with research on other student populations during the pandemic (13-16). It is also consistent with the studies examining online and traditional social work education prior to the pandemic. For example, Okech et al. (17) examined master of social work students' experiences of remote and face-to-

face educational formats and found that the instructor's role is a fundamental component in students' perceptions of their learning experience. Students were more likely to report positive experiences when faculty could help them work through technical difficulties.

There is considerably less research on the effectiveness of remote education from the faculty member's perspective. The limited research has found that faculty perceive remote education as less effective than face-to-face education. It also suggests that distance learning could have been more effective in terms of practice-oriented competencies (18). However, it is important to note that this research is mainly pre-pandemic and needs to consider the unanticipated shift to remote education that was forced upon faculty. We aim to enhance our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on social work education by examining the experiences of social work faculty and their perspective on the online educational experience during the pandemic. In the current research, in addition to exploring the socio-demographic characteristics and learning environment, five main questions have been addressed:

- What is the faculty perspective regarding the student online experience?
- What are the effective online teaching aspects during the pandemic?
- What are the ineffective online teaching aspects during the pandemic?
- What are the implications for online teaching and teaching practices that will be retained post-pandemic?
- What is the future of social work education and the profession?

## Methods

### *Study Design and Setting*

This qualitative study utilized an online survey with five main essay (Open-ended) questions to explore the experience of social work faculty and administrators approximately 6 months following the onset of shelter-at-home orders (quarantine) instituted in response to the COVID-19

pandemic. Qualtrics was used as the survey platform. The web-based software enabled users to create surveys and generate reports without requiring programming knowledge or competency. Surveys were distributed electronically to schools of social work in Turkey.

### *Participants and Sampling*

Purposive sampling was used to recruit the study participants from 8 universities in 8 provinces in Turkey. Surveys were administered between July 1st, 2020 and August 6th, 2020. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board and after signing consent, 20 faculty members of the social work program completed the 5 open-ended essay main questions as well as the 8 close-ended demographic and 2 short answer questions.

For this study, we included individuals who taught social work in Turkey in 2020, were proficient in Turkish, English, or Russian, and were at least 24 years old. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (19), social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, fosters development and social cohesion, and empowers individuals. Participants who failed to respond to more than 20% of the questions were excluded from the study.

### *Tools/Instruments*

A research-made e-questionnaire was designed to assess five main questions: the effective and ineffective aspects of remote education during COVID-19, the faculty perspective of the student online experience, online teaching and teaching practices that will be retained post-pandemic, and the future of social work education and the profession.

In addition, sociodemographic characteristics and learning environment data were asked:

***Sociodemographic Characteristics:*** Participants were asked to answer 7 questions indicating their age, gender, race, level of education, the province in which

their university was located, how often a disaster occurs in that province, and whether their school had a disaster response plan/educational continuity plan prior to the pandemic.

**Employment Characteristics:** Faculty were asked to answer 5 questions regarding their employment status. The questions included their position at the university (full-time, part-time, doctoral student), title (Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Lecturer, etc.), type of university (public or private), size of program, and number of years teaching.

**Pre-pandemic Online Teaching Experience:** Faculty were asked to share details of their online teaching experience before the pandemic in 6 questions. The 3 multiple-choice questions included previous online teaching experience (yes/no), years of online teaching, and teaching experience during a disaster (yes/no). Faculty were also asked to share details of the impact of previous times of disaster on their teaching and what worked well in delivering their courses during those times in 2 open-ended questions. Lastly, faculty were asked to share 3 things they would have changed to improve their teaching during previous online teaching experiences in times of disaster.

**Online Education Experience during the Pandemic:** Faculty members were requested to provide detailed information about their experiences with teaching online during the pandemic. The survey contained 9 multiple-choice questions, including whether they taught online during the pandemic (yes/no), the platform they used for course delivery, changes to their teaching routines due to the pandemic (such as cancellations, holding live sessions online, switching to asynchronous teaching, or stopping teaching because they couldn't manage to teach online), the impact of the pandemic on workload (increased, decreased, stayed the same), the impact on productivity, relationship with other faculty members, and classes (nature of communication with students, types of accommodations to students, delivery of

course content, modifications to assignments, and so on), the impact on the relationship with students, and perception of the impact of the pandemic on students (lack of focus, problems at home, decreased productivity in classwork, and so forth). Additionally, there was an 'other' category for each question to allow faculty members to share their personal opinions and perspectives.

Faculty were also asked three open-ended questions, including describing the most and least effective teaching methods and the methods that will be retained in future teaching.

**Health and Mental Health Functioning:** The personal impact of COVID-19 and related response measures (i.e., shelter-in practices) on faculty health and mental health was also assessed in the survey. Faculty members were asked two multiple-choice and two open-ended questions, including: "Has your physical health or the physical health of your immediate circle been impacted by the pandemic (yes/no)?", "Has your mental health or the mental health of your immediate circle been impacted by the pandemic (yes/no)?", "Please share the details regarding how your physical health or that of your immediate circle has been impacted by COVID-19.", "Please share the details regarding how your mental health or that of your immediate circle has been impacted by COVID-19."

**Social Work Profession:** Faculty members were asked to share their perspectives regarding the role of social workers during a global crisis and the future of social work education and the profession in general in a post-pandemic context. They were asked 5 multiple-choice questions, including "What are your thoughts about social work education in the upcoming year?", "What role do social workers play during the pandemic?", "How do you think COVID-19 will change the social work profession?", "What social work skills need to be strengthened in social work education to better prepare practitioners for times of emergency, such as COVID-19?", "What new skills need to be incorporated into social work education to prepare students

for practice during a pandemic/disaster in the future?" Lastly, one question was posed to faculty, asking them to share any additional information they wanted to provide regarding their teaching experience during the pandemic.

**Validity and Reliability** – A researcher-made questionnaire based on the study's main purpose was used to determine the research objectives. The content validity of the questions was confirmed by the opinions of five faculty members from the Department of Social Work who had experience with virtual education during the COVID-19 era. A peer evaluation and consensus method was used to analyze and interpret the participants' responses.

#### *Data Collection*

Using an online survey tool, the researchers distributed the questionnaire link to participants' email addresses. Additionally, follow-up reminders were subsequently sent to ensure they had responded.

#### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative data was analyzed using conventional content analysis, which is a widely accepted methodology that entails a robust and systematic process of coding and classification. This method guides the analysis and description of qualitative data that has been used successfully by the principal investigators in multiple previous research studies (20, 21). All authors reviewed the participant data to identify dominant themes. The first round of coding was conducted by the authors independently. Once the independent coding was completed, team meetings were held to review the coding/categories. Any idiosyncratic and/or redundant responses were then removed. Finally, the study team reviewed any cases of discrepancies in coding until inter-rater consistency of at least 80% for these items was achieved, in accordance with standards in the literature (22).

**Ethics** - Participation and survey completion were voluntary. Before conducting the research, participants were given an information sheet and consent, and they had

the right to withdraw from the study. The study was approved by the Istinye University Social and Humanitarian Science Research Ethical Committee to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

## **Results**

### *Sociodemographic Characteristics and Learning Environment*

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the sample and the context of the educational program attended. Overall, 20 faculty members completed the survey. A majority of the sample identified as female (80%). The average age of participants was  $36 \pm 6.04$  years old. Faculty participants were mostly individuals with PhDs (70%), teaching full-time (85%), and affiliated with a private university (50%). The majority of faculty members had less than 10 years of teaching experience (75%). All but one participant reported switching to online teaching in response to the pandemic (95%), with an equal number of participants reporting using asynchronous and synchronous sessions. One participant stopped teaching because all classes were canceled (Table 1).

In terms of online teaching, 70% of faculty reported having no experience teaching online courses before the onset of the pandemic. It is noteworthy that only two participants (10%) noted having the awareness that their school had a disaster/educational continuity plan before the onset of the pandemic. The most utilized online teaching platform among the faculty participants in this study was Perculus (30%). Furthermore, 60% of the sample reported that they had no prior experience teaching during a time of crisis, and that their university is located in a region where disasters never or rarely occur (45%).

In response to questions about the impact of the pandemic on productivity, an equal number of the participants reported a lower and higher level of productivity since the onset of the pandemic (35%). Additionally, 25% of the participants reported feeling distant from their faculty colleagues and a lost sense of community as a result of the

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Sociodemographic Characteristic	Response (%)
Age range (24-49 Years), Mean (36±6.04)	(N=20)
<b>Sex</b>	(N=19)
Female	16 (80)
Male	3 (15)
<b>Highest degree of education</b>	(N=20)
Doctoral degree (DSW/PhD)	14 (70)
Master's degree	6 (30)
<b>Position at the University</b>	
Full-time	17 (85)
Part-time	1 (5)
Doctoral student	1 (5)
Other	1 (5)
<b>Location of the University</b>	(N=19)
Istanbul	6 (30)
Ankara	2 (10)
Kutahya	1 (5)
Elazig	1 (5)
Konya	1 (5)
Sirnak	1 (5)
Yalova	1 (5)
Other, Turkey	2 (13)
Northern Cyprus	4 (20)
<b>Type of School</b>	(N=20)
Public	10 (60)
Private	9 (45)
Other	1 (5)
<b>Size of the Social Work Program</b>	(N=20)
30-100 students	6 (30)
101-200 students	8 (40)
201-500 students	3 (15)
More than 500 students	3 (15)
<b>Type of degrees offered at the university</b>	(N=20)
Bachelor of Social Work	10 (50)
Bachelor and Master of Social Work	5 (25)
Bachelor, Master, and PhD in Social Work	3 (15)
Bachelor, Master, PhD, and DSW	1 (5)
Associate degree (Vocational School)	1 (5)
<b>Work experience</b>	(N=20)
0-2 years	5 (25)
3-5 years	5 (25)
6-10 years	5 (25)
More than 10 years	4 (20)
More than 20 years	1 (5)

<b>Taught online courses pre-COVID</b>	(N=20)
No	14 (70)
Yes	5 (25)
Hybrid	1 (5)
<b>Switched to online teaching as a result of COVID</b>	(N=20)
Yes	19 (95)
No	1 (5)

pandemic, while the majority reported no change in their relationship to their colleagues (40%). Similarly, some faculty reported increased conflict and decreased connection with students as a result of teaching online (5%), while one participant did not want to teach anymore (5%). However, many reported no impact or an increased connection with students during their online teaching (35%). Notably, while only one participant reported contracting COVID-19 personally (5%), a majority of faculty reported experiencing mental health distress related to the pandemic (65%). Faculty reported the impact of fear, lack of socializing, and loads of work with a lack of help on their mental health:

*The fact that there were restrictions on going out, the disease was highly contagious, and the constant fear that something would happen to me or someone around me had a very negative effect on me mentally. In addition, I think that the feeling of loneliness is felt more deeply since we have a very low chance of socializing during this period.* (Teaching Assistant, 30 years old)

*Working from home was a real challenge for me. Previously, I had a cleaner who would come to my house once a week to help with the housework. After the pandemic, she couldn't come. My child could not go to school. Responsibilities have increased too much. I started using antidepressants in this process.* (Teaching Assistant, 35 years old)

Those faculty members who reported teaching during a previous crisis (such as a major earthquake) had experienced both positive and negative influences on their online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the positive side, faculty reported that from those previous experiences they learned the

importance of having institutional support for faculty teaching and psychosocial needs; the importance of being familiar with the online platform/technology being used to teach classes; the importance of being prepared to adapt/modify lesson times and dates; the importance of providing coordination for students during disasters, such as maintaining close, honest communication, providing clear instructions, adding additional meetings via Zoom or phone; holding flexible expectations regarding timely assignment completion and submission, and having acquired an ability to develop new class activities and assessment and evaluation methods (homework, presentation, etc.) for the online environment; having more awareness on the impact of trauma; having awareness of their own need to cope with the stress caused by an increased workload and the disruption of key services that support their family and work balance (childcare, schools, etc.); having experience with working from home and using time efficiently to prepare for live sessions; and, having experience with the remote education environment, including creating online lessons, arranging online office hours, and pre-recording lessons.

On the negative side, faculty reported increased sensitivity to stress due to the rapidly changing conditions brought on by the crisis. They also expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to educate effectively in an online format, feeling personally affected by the pandemic, and feeling overwhelmed while trying to provide a suitable learning environment for students under these conditions. Additionally, they are unable to utilize university facilities to prepare for classes and have lost the support of their colleagues.

### *The Online Student Experience from a Faculty Perspective*

Faculty identified the three academic, social, and personal domains, in which they believe their students experienced online education during the pandemic.

**In terms of the academic domain,** faculty

shared their belief that students were generally dissatisfied, frustrated, and stressed by canceled classes, decreased class times, and reduced class sessions. They also reported that students struggled with technical challenges related to attending school online, difficulty communicating with peers and instructors, and decreased sense of engagement, resulting in limited participation and completion of schoolwork.

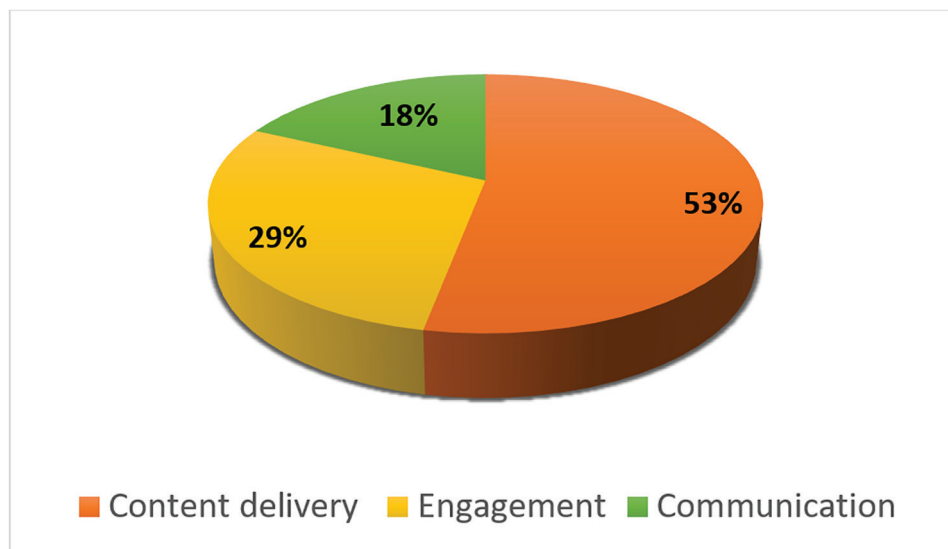
**In terms of the personal domain,** faculty observed that students were struggling with mental health and family-related issues. For example, they noted that some students seemed to feel displaced and experience a loss of connection due to the switch to online education. Additionally, some students experienced psychological distress due to the pandemic, particularly having difficulty focusing, and they needed more emotional support. Faculty also reported that they believed some students were struggling with pandemic-related financial loss, increased problems with family members, and increased caregiver responsibilities.

**In terms of the social domain,** faculty members expressed concerns that students were experiencing difficulties with the disruption of their social lives as a result of the pandemic. They pointed out that the inability to attend campus due to school closures and shelter-in-place restrictions not only restricted access to campus facilities for learning, but also hindered socializing with peers and participating in social activities and events.

### *Ineffective Online Teaching Aspects during the Pandemic*

Figure 1 reports the aspects of online teaching identified as ineffective by faculty members. Three domains emerged as areas of online teaching that were particularly problematic or ineffective, including content delivery, engagement, and communication.

**In terms of content delivery,** faculty highlighted limitations with content delivery, particularly in relation to extended lecturing and online exams. They also noted that administering exams online seemed ineffective in assessing learning and



**Figure 1:** Percentage of responses about ineffective aspects of remote education during COVID-19

competence. Here are some comments from faculty members:

*“It is my preference to process the course content in the form of question-and-answer and discussion in an interactive classroom environment. However, this could not be done online in the same way, and the lessons took place in the form of a one-sided lecture.”*

*“When the professor only lectures about the material during the lesson, the students cannot focus and listen.”*

*“Exams, PowerPoints, lecturing, homework didn’t work”*

**In terms of engagement,** faculty recognized that difficulty making/maintaining eye contact with students was a significant limitation to their teaching effectiveness. Additionally, they noted that having limited opportunities to interact actively with students during online classes resulted in decreased student performance and lower homework completion rates, which they attributed to students not feeling accountable or responsible in the online setting. Furthermore, faculty noted that this accountability also extended to attendance in online classes and students would often leave the session abruptly by walking away from the computer. Faculty also noted a decrease in student participation during classes. Here are some comments from faculty members:

*“There was limited interaction in lessons.*

*In addition, since there is no obligation to attend the course, the students left us alone on the online system”*

*“When I looked into the eyes of the student, I could feel whether she/he understood the subject taught in the lesson. However, there is no such opportunity in online classes.”*

*“Lessons were not interactive, students’ participation decreased, and they were less prepared for the lessons because they did not feel much responsibility.”*

**In terms of communication,** faculty noted limited interaction with students as a significant problem with online teaching, reporting more difficulty with follow-up with students (doing student check-ins) and more difficulty effectively communicating instructions/homework assignments. Here are some comments from faculty members:

*“Student follow-up is more difficult due to limited communication, but lecturing alone is not enough.”*

*“It was very difficult to process the topics that need to be discussed in class (because of limited communication).”*

*“As the teacher (it felt like) I provided one-sided instruction”*

Notably, several participants commented that, in general, they found the entire online teaching experience to be ineffective and that face-to-face instruction provided a stronger learning experience. The faculty pointed out



that the traditional face-to-face classroom experience enables more interaction and engagement with students. It also allows for more effective lecturing and the use of PowerPoints, as well as better utilization of nonverbal behavior such as maintaining eye contact and gauging student understanding and comprehension.

### *Effective Online Teaching Aspects during the Pandemic*

Aspects of online teaching that faculty reported were conducive to an effective learning experience also fell within the three domains of content delivery, engagement, and communication (Figure 2).

**In terms of content delivery,** faculty members have found it effective to use a combination of asynchronous video lectures along with small group discussions during live online classes. They have also increased opportunities for students to work independently, reduced course content, modified assignments, spent more time preparing for live sessions, and monitored students' participation with course material (e.g., whether they watched a required lecture or video, or completed an online module). Here are some comments from faculty members:

*"I found that asking more questions and increasing the amount of homework, particularly homework based on research*

*and interpretation, is more useful in achieving the purpose of the course."*

*"I had more time to prepare for the class. I used to spend 4 hours on the road every day. I spent this time at home preparing lessons and reading."*

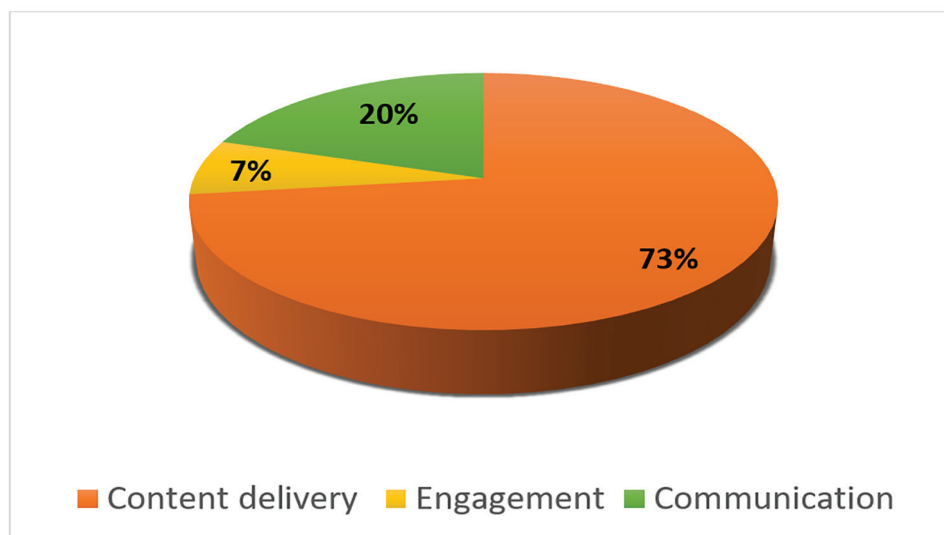
*"Pictures/images and current examples helped improve instruction."*

**In terms of student engagement,** faculty identified several effective strategies for keeping students engaged during online classes. These included assigning homework to prepare students for live session content, delivering shorter lectures, and focusing on discussions in smaller groups and whole class sessions. Other strategies mentioned were pre-session preparation by faculty, incorporating interactive activities like debates, discussions, and presentations, giving personalized homework assignments to small classes, and using visual materials such as graphics and videos. Here are some comments from faculty members:

*"Students get more efficiency in the lessons where they are more active and make presentations. The students also stated that the true-false questions at the end of each unit, consisting of a few questions, were both fun and instructive."*

*"If the lessons are held in small groups, the students force themselves to be more active."*

*"I used videos for each topic. To make*



**Figure 2:** Percentage of responses about effective aspects of remote education during COVID-19

*the lessons more fun, I added short videos such as animations and advertisements that I found on the subject to my lessons."*

**In terms of communication,** the faculty identified several key considerations that made teaching effective in the online format. These included purposefully scheduling additional check-in meetings with students outside of live sessions to interact with students (i.e., additional small group or individual Zoom meetings) and attending to the psychosocial needs of students. Here are some comments from faculty members:

*"I increased the number and hours of online office hours."*

*"I made sure students got in touch with me in-person to increase their motivation and to help them better understand the course."*

*"I organized extra Zoom meetings with students."*

#### *Implications for Online Teaching and Teaching Practices that will be Retained Post-Pandemic*

Faculty have found that scheduling small group check-ins with students via Zoom was essential for maintaining communication and engagement, and they plan to continue using this approach in their post-pandemic teaching. Faculty also noted the benefits of reducing reliance on lectures and PowerPoint presentations in favor of engaging students to discover and analyze relevant information, which proved to be an effective method for enhancing the learning that will be retained even after the pandemic. They also found that shifting the focus and nature of homework to be viewed as a pre-session preparation activity helped increase students' class preparedness and enhanced their learning. The benefits of using graphics and videos as a means to engage students were also highlighted as a key practice that faculty will continue to use in their post-pandemic teaching. Some faculty noted that the ability to monitor tests administered online increases fairness (reduces cheating), and they plan to continue this method of testing.

Despite recognizing some benefits of

online teaching that had not been identified before and finding some positive aspects of the pandemic-related online teaching experience that actually made their teaching more effective than before, faculty also shared several ideas for further improving online education. Gleaned from their online pandemic teaching experience, factors identified fell within the categories of administration/university-wide efforts as well as those under the purview of faculty, such as modes of content delivery and engagement with students. As far as university-level efforts, faculty emphasized that it is critical for the administration to establish a disaster preparedness guide with clear plans for education continuity in times of crisis. It was also pointed out that both students and faculty members require additional training to develop the necessary technological skills for effective teaching and learning in an online setting, as well as the relevant effective methods for effectively delivering course material in a virtual class environment (rather than relying on traditional in-person methods, such as lecturing and PowerPoints). Additionally, training should also cover the impact of trauma, grief, loss, and cultural differences related to experiencing and expressing psychosocial distress. In relation to this, the faculty highlighted the need for the administration to provide technological support during classes. Additionally, they suggested that universities should provide resources for childcare support to faculty with children to ensure uninterrupted teaching. Lastly, faculty identified the importance of faculty having an awareness of the political context of the crisis, facilitating a greater understanding of the policies the administration puts into place to manage educational continuity during these times and improving communication between administration and faculty as well as faculty and students.

In order to improve online teaching during future crises, several considerations for faculty members have been identified. These included increasing communication with students by

sending them videos and having extra phone or Zoom meetings; placing extra effort on student engagement, such as frequently asking students questions to assess their understanding and increase their active class participation; being flexible with and providing accommodations for students directly affected by the crisis (i.e., those who contracted COVID-19); and prioritizing mental health and well-being during crisis periods.

### *Future of Social Education and Profession*

All participants anticipated that the social work educational programs would either remain online or become hybrid, with some on-campus and some virtual classes as well as flexible course schedules. All the faculty members agreed that social workers should be recognized as essential and should have a direct role in making decisions during disasters. They also believe that training in disaster preparedness and response should be more emphasized in social work curricula. In addition, some faculty members expressed a belief that the social work profession will increasingly rely on digital technology for practices such as virtual psychotherapy. They also suggested that social work will become more collaborative and interdisciplinary in nature. Furthermore, they emphasized the need for social workers to become more technologically savvy. The faculty also pointed out that social work programs currently do not adequately teach skills such as case management, crisis management, advocacy, and macro-level practice related to inequality, economic and social justice. They stressed that these skills need to be strengthened to ensure that social workers can effectively and efficiently address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 era.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to further our understanding of the pandemic's impact on social work education by examining the experiences of social work faculty and their perspectives on the online educational experience during the pandemic. The results

of this study demonstrate that the unexpected and rapid transition to distance teaching due to the COVID-19 Pandemic increased stress and workload levels, particularly among participants who had limited to no prior experience or training in effective online teaching methodology. This is not necessarily surprising as prior research has demonstrated that it typically takes two to three iterations of teaching a course for faculty to feel comfortable (23).

The stress levels experienced by faculty in the current study varied based on the degree of modifications they made to the course content. Participants who duplicated their in-person course format using the same preparation and lecture material experienced little or no increased workload. However, they received feedback from students indicating dissatisfaction with their teaching methods and reported higher levels of stress and frustration related to feeling ineffective and incompetent as online educators.

Those faculty members who opted towards maintaining a flexible and adaptive approach and attempted to implement new course delivery modalities that emphasized student engagement (i.e., modifying assignments, individualizing homework, incorporating new digital material), reported increased workload and preparation time but higher levels of satisfaction with their online teaching and less issues of disengagement by students. This begs the question, what support/training do faculty need to feel comfortable adapting their traditional teaching style to an online environment to support student experience and learning?

Our findings indicate that the key to addressing this question lies in the degree of training provided to faculty and opportunities for ongoing exposure to online teaching formats. Faculty need opportunities to teach online when they are not in the context of a global crisis in order to develop a sense of competence and mastery of the style of teaching required in a virtual learning environment and provide students with an effective educational experience. With

ongoing exposure, faculty can develop confidence in developing and modifying course content as well as delivery methods to meet students' needs best. Administration also needs to support faculty in modifying, developing, and testing innovative modalities of delivering course content, engaging students, and assessing competence through novel assignments that are more appropriate for an online environment. Without the recognition and support of the administration, faculty will feel compelled to adhere strictly to traditional syllabi and delivery methods (i.e., lectures), which may not effectively address students' challenges and needs.

Of note, faculty members shared a belief that students: 1) were generally dissatisfied, frustrated, and stressed by canceled classes and decreased class times and reduced class sessions; 2) struggled with technical challenges related to attending school online; 3) had difficulty communicating with peers and instructors; 4) experienced decreased sense of engagement resulting in limited participation and completion of schoolwork; 5) felt displaced and experienced a loss of connection as a result of the switch to online education; 6) experienced psychological distress due to the pandemic, particularly, difficulty focusing; 7) required more emotional support; 8) were struggling with pandemic-related financial loss, increased problems with family members, and increased caregiver responsibilities; and 9) felt tension related to restricted socializing with peers and engaging in social activities and events.

This perspective, however, is not fully aligned with research suggesting that, despite challenges and barriers, the student experience with online education during the pandemic was far less negative. For example, the previous study of social work graduate students in Turkey found that the majority of the participants in our study (76.5 %) rated their online education experience as fair or above (at least 3 out of 5) (12). Students identified numerous factors related to their remote learning across the same three domains that faculty identified as being particularly

negative, including personal, social, and academic domains. However, in that study, students reported the greatest benefits in the academic domain, which faculty noted as most negative. Continuity of education, regardless of immobility (due to lock-down or disease) (66%); digitalization of materials that did not exist before the pandemic (27%); and new access to global expertise and information (22%) were the most strongly endorsed academic benefits related to online education identified by students (12). Students in that study also reported benefits related to receiving more compassion and support from instructors (17%) as well as increased opportunities for interaction with others through email, chat, and phone (12). The student participants emphasized that these benefits were achievable because they could access improved counseling and psychosocial services provided by their universities, engage more with their peers, and have more positive interactions with their faculty, all of which would provide them with the necessary psychosocial and emotional support. This aligns with pre-pandemic studies, which have found that online students report comparable, if not greater, satisfaction with the quality of the learning environment, faculty accessibility, helpfulness, and advising as compared to traditional students (24-27). Students also highlighted a significant barrier to their educational experience: a general lack of familiarity, knowledge, and preparedness on behalf of faculty to effectively modify teaching for an online environment (12, 28, 29).

Thus, while faculty correctly perceived that students required more attending to their psychosocial needs during their online pandemic-related education and the critical role of maintaining open, clear, and supportive communication with and between students, they over-estimated the degree of struggle related to loss of sense of community and difficulty with engagement in classes and under-estimated their role in ensuring a positive and effective learning experience. That is, while faculty members acknowledged their personal beliefs that lecturing and online exams were largely ineffective and that they

needed more training to understand how to modify and adapt traditional face-to-face content delivery methods to effectively shift to the online environment, they did not seem to understand that students shared this belief and were able to recognize that faculty lacked technological savvy and did not use effective, innovative teaching methods, which served as one of the key reasons they felt dissatisfied with their online education. This finding highlights that students, as well as faculty, experience frustration related to a lack of faculty training on online teaching. Other research during the pandemic (30) supports this finding, as does research before the pandemic, which raised similar concerns about a lack of instructor competence and training, curriculum quality and rigor, and student monitoring and assessment (31).

#### *Implications for Graduate Social Work Programs*

To assume that faculty can simply teach online as they do in the traditional in-person classroom or that they can intuitively adapt material without specific support, understanding, and training on effective online teaching methods is largely incorrect and serves as a significant challenge to online teaching and learning, negating the numerous benefits that can be gleaned from the virtual learning environment.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that faculty lacked the needed institutional support to facilitate an efficient and successful transition to remote teaching. Faculty need training and guidelines on best practices for online teaching, including chunking of material, flipped classroom approaches, effective ways of building community in an online classroom, and providing emotional support to students. Before the pandemic, some recommendations were developed to increase the effectiveness of and satisfaction with online education, mainly focused on personalizing the virtual learning experience to individual students' needs (32, 33), promoting student engagement (32, 34), and recommended instructional design and

approaches (35, 36). However, the nature and challenges associated with the pandemic require further consideration.

We have developed an updated set of 10 core recommendations for social work education programs to ensure effective course content delivery and prepare students with the relevant skills they need to practice effectively in a post-pandemic world (12). Our findings suggest these recommendations are just as important for faculty experience as they are for students:

1. Establishing a clear and responsive emergency preparedness plan for future crises, including technological considerations and educational platforms, which will be distributed to the university community to ensure awareness and understanding.

2. Delivering course content in smaller modules to facilitate and enhance student focus and engagement.

3. Include opportunities for interaction with peers and faculty in the virtual classroom through discussion boards, breakout rooms, and small group activities.

4. Providing training to faculty to strengthen their online teaching skills.

5. Providing ongoing access to multi-modal forms of psychosocial support to promote and support well-being (virtual and/or in-person peer support groups and access to university counseling services and interactive events).

6. Updating social work curricula to include a focus on crisis and disaster management and complex emergencies.

7. Increasing educational content on multi-disciplinary work to address structural factors (i.e., economic inequity).

8. Retaining the positive aspects of online learning into standard educational practices after the pandemic remits, including 1) ongoing development of and access to digitalized materials, encouraging the use of global knowledge and expertise, and incorporation of asynchronous material.

9. Addressing inequities regarding student access to technology to avoid marginalizing mature and/or lower-income students.

10. Increasing relevance of social work

and sustainability of practice by including training on responsive modes of practice in the curriculum, including ethical and effective telehealth and virtual health practices and the use of AI.

We have included three additional recommendations based on insights gained from the current study and our better understanding of the impact of the pandemic on social work education from the faculty perspective:

1. Providing faculty with the flexibility to modify assignments and course structure to address students' social-emotional needs during times of crisis.

2. Providing training to faculty to effectively identify symptoms of mental health distress in their students to promote early identification of those students that may be struggling and at risk of dropping out of school and in need of extra support, with a particular emphasis on the impact of and signs of trauma, grief, and loss.

3. Providing a forum for faculty support and, extending attention to mental well-being to faculty as well as students during times of crisis to reduce the increased stress reported by faculty.

### *Limitations and Suggestions*

This study had some methodological limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, our sample was full-time faculty and may not be generalizable to contingent faculty. Therefore, future research should explore the experience and needs of adjunct instructors. Second, our sample was largely Turkish, with little representation of the Kurdish population, and therefore, findings may not be generalizable to that population. Third, we could not examine differences in teaching experiences across genders as we had a very small sample of male respondents. Fourth, as participation and survey completion were voluntary, it may be that faculty with more technological and online teaching experience self-selected to participate in the study. Future research should investigate the challenges faced by social worker faculty who may not be

as technologically savvy, yet were required to teach in an online format due to the pandemic. Lastly, the overall sample size was rather small due to potential burnout with remote work and reduced willingness to participate in online activities like completing the study questionnaire. However, as a pilot study in an area with very little prior understanding or experience, this study offers meaningful insights and implications for remote social work education.

### **Conclusion**

The pandemic is far from over, and its impact will be felt for decades, if not generations, to come. Virtual therapy and support services are a new norm and will continue to increase in prevalence. Online education will also persist, if not grow, as the nature of employment and education change in response to the pandemic. How well the social work profession is positioned to address emerging needs in this context will depend on the effectiveness of social work graduate education programs to improve the delivery of educational content online and evolve to include content related to clinical practice in a virtual world. Future research should continue to explore key components of the social work curriculum needed to adequately prepare the next generation of social workers. Best practices for online teaching grounded in simulated learning and promoting the development of relational skills is also essential.

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### **Authors' Contribution**

Each author contributed to key aspects of the study preparation, data analysis, and/or manuscript preparation. PZI, GU, and MA designed the study and collected the data.

PZI and DA analyzed the data, drafted, and finalized the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript and approved the final version.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

The study was approved on May 21st, 2020, meeting number 2020/6, decision number 03, by the Istinye University Social and Humanitarian Science Research Ethical Committee to ensure ethical standards were met. No personally identifiable information was disclosed. Participants received a consent form before the research and had the option to withdraw from the study.

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### Availability of Data and Materials

The data set for this study is available and can be accessed by emailing the first author.

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